

How to talk to your legislators

By Paul F. Eno *Editor*

The 2010 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly has begun, and it's crucial that *every* Rhode Island Builders Association member get involved on all levels to communicate our industry's point of view in the face of tough issues like the state's frazzled economy, massive deficits, the loss of construction education programs, and the stumbling housing market.

Ominous tax proposals and regulations that could harm our industry, and that were held off last year, especially onerous jobsite apprenticeship ratios for non-licensed trades, are expected to resurface in 2010.

These are some suggestions on how to talk with your state senators and representatives.

1. It's crucial to remember that, whether they know you personally or not, lawmakers may know very little about the residential construction industry except from the point of view of anti-growth forces. Particularly when it comes to the nitty-gritty of the construction business, land planning and environmental regulation, you can make the difference between a balanced view and a negative one.

Remember that a lawmaker may have formed no opinion at all on our issues, and may have taken no position on bills of concern to you.

2. When expressing your position on a bill, do so in terms of personal experience. Tell the lawmaker about the contribution your company makes to the local economy and talk about the effect the proposal will have in terms of local jobs, quality of life and the community. That helps illustrate the human side of the effect on your business and on his or her constituents.

3. Don't monopolize the conversation. Ask the legislator what can be done, and allow him or her to talk.

4. Do not overstate! Don't say things like, "This bill will drive me out of business!" Credibility is key.

5. Don't challenge or threaten the legislator; attack the bill, not the person.

6. Invite the legislator to social affairs such as local opening celebrations, ground breakings or other events that you may be involved in. They will appreciate the opportunity to meet constituents, learn about your company and its plans and meet local reporters.

7. During elections, provide financial support. Walk the district with the candidate, provide sign material and locations or provide election-day volunteers, etc.

8. Lobbying is cumulative, and it takes patience and persistence. Our effectiveness cannot be maintained by RIBA's lobbyist and Legislative Committee alone. To be effective, RIBA needs its members to be active government-relations representatives every day!

For more information on any legislative issue facing the shelter industry in 2010, watch the legislative summary in the Library section of the www.ribuilders.org website or contact RIBA Executive Director Roger Warren at (401) 438-7400 or by e-mail at rwarren@ribuilders.org.